When Special Excursion Trains Brought Thousands to the Fairbury Fair

By: Dale C. Maley
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Today, most visitors travel to the Fairbury Fair by automobile, but in the early years, the journey to Fairbury was very different. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of people traveled to the Fairbury Fair by railroad. Special excursion trains brought visitors from surrounding towns and farming communities, making the fair one of the largest annual gatherings in the area.

The first Fairbury Fair was held in 1876, at a time when railroads were rapidly expanding across Illinois. The arrival of the railroad played a major role in the growth of many Midwestern towns, including Fairbury. Railroads made it possible for people to travel longer distances much more quickly than by horse and wagon.

By the late 1800s, Fairbury was served by several important rail lines. These railroads connected Fairbury with nearby towns and larger cities throughout the region. Because of these rail connections, the Fairbury Fair became accessible to many people who lived miles away from the town.

Railroads often scheduled special excursion trains to coincide with major events such as the Fairbury Fair. These trains offered reduced fares and convenient schedules designed specifically for fair visitors. Advertisements in local newspapers frequently promoted these excursions, encouraging people from neighboring communities to travel to Fairbury for the fair.

For many visitors, the trip to the fair began at their local train depot. Families and groups of friends boarded the excursion trains early in the day, often bringing picnic baskets or spending money for food and entertainment at the fairgrounds. As the train approached Fairbury, passengers could see the town and the surrounding farmland that had made the fair possible.

When the train arrived at the Fairbury depot, the fairgrounds were only a short walk away. The distance from the depot to the fairgrounds was approximately four blocks. Visitors could step off the train and walk through town to reach the fair.

For people who had traveled several miles by train, this short walk was a small part of the day's adventure. As they walked through Fairbury, they could see other visitors arriving from different directions, all heading toward the fairgrounds.

During the early years of the fair, horse-drawn wagons and buggies were also a common sight along the roads leading into Fairbury. Farmers and their families often traveled from surrounding rural areas to attend the fair. When the weather was favorable and the

attractions were appealing, the combined arrival of wagon traffic and excursion trains could bring thousands of people into the town.

The large crowds created a lively atmosphere throughout Fairbury. Stores, restaurants, and businesses often benefited from the increase in visitors. The fair was not only an agricultural exhibition but also an important social event for the entire region.

Once visitors reached the fairgrounds, they found a wide variety of activities and attractions. Early fairs featured livestock exhibitions, crop displays, and farm machinery demonstrations. Farmers proudly exhibited their cattle, horses, and hogs, hoping to win prizes and recognition for their work.

Horse racing was another popular attraction that drew large crowds. Spectators gathered around the racetrack to watch the races and cheer for their favorite horses. These races were often among the most exciting events of the fair.

In addition to agricultural exhibits and racing, entertainment acts were gradually added to attract even larger audiences. Traveling performers, magicians, acrobats, and novelty acts sometimes appeared at the fairgrounds. Balloon ascensions and parachute jumps also became popular attractions during the late nineteenth century.

The combination of agricultural exhibits and entertainment made the fair appealing to people of all ages. Families could spend an entire day at the fairgrounds, visiting exhibits, watching races, and enjoying the entertainment.

The railroad excursion trains played an important role in enabling these large crowds. Without the railroad, many visitors would have found it difficult to travel long distances to attend the fair. The trains allowed people from towns across the region to participate in the event.

For many visitors, the trip to the Fairbury Fair by train was an experience they remembered for many years. Riding the excursion train with friends and neighbors added to the day's excitement. The return trip home in the evening gave people an opportunity to talk about the events they had witnessed and the prizes awarded.

As the twentieth century progressed, transportation gradually changed. Automobiles became more common, and more people began traveling to the fair by car rather than by train. Improved roads made it easier for visitors to drive directly to the fairgrounds.

Over time, special excursion trains became less common as automobile travel replaced rail travel for most fair visitors. Despite these changes, the railroad era remains an important chapter in the history of the Fairbury Fair.

The image of thousands of people arriving in Fairbury by excursion train and walking the four blocks from the depot to the fairgrounds reminds us how important the railroad once

was to the community. In those years, the trains helped transform the fair into a major regional event that brought together people from many neighboring towns.

Today, visitors still come from across the region to attend the Fairbury Fair. Although they now arrive mostly by automobile, the sense of community and tradition that began in those early railroad days remains an important part of the fair.

The special excursion trains that once brought thousands of visitors to Fairbury played a key role in building the long tradition of the Fairbury Fair. Their arrival each year helped create the large crowds and festive atmosphere that made the fair one of the most anticipated events in the region.

SPECIAL TRAIN--Excursion Rates.

A special train from Gilman to the Fairbury Fair will be run September 4 and 5 on the following schedule:

Leave Gilman at 8:35 a. m.
" LaHogue at 8:45 a. m.
" Piper City at 8:55 a. m.
Leave Chatsworth at 9:07 a. m.
" Forrest at 9:25 a. m.
Arrive Fairbury at 9:35 a. m.

Returning train will leave Fairbury at 6 p. m.
EXCURSION RATES ON ALL RAILROADS.

A. D. WESTERVELT, Sec.

Top: This newspaper advertisement announced a special excursion train from Gilman and other towns to the Fairbury Fair on September 4 and 5, with excursion rates on all railroads. **Bottom:** A large crowd arrived in Fairbury by TP&W passenger train for the railroad's annual employee picnic on August 26, 1911. These images show how special excursion trains brought thousands of visitors to Fairbury for major events, including the Fairbury Fair.